



PHOTOGRAPHY (TOP LEFT) TASMANIAN TOURISM, (BOTTOM LEFT) BELINDA JACKSON, (BOTTOM RIGHT) PHOTOLIBRARY

southern comfort

Introducing Australia's capital of quirk – hello, Hobart!

WORDS BELINDA JACKSON

Clockwise from top left: the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race; Customs House Hotel's elegant bar; the Salamanca Arts Centre; and laid-back luxe at the Islington Hotel.



ABOVE The infamous Tasman Bridge, the site of a tragedy in 1975, connects Hobart's two halves over the peaceful Derwent River.

LEFT The promenade near the Customs House Hotel, just one of the city's many historic buildings and only minutes away from the waterfront's dynamic cafe society.



Something for everyone: tourists and locals alike can pass the hours in pleasure at (from right) unique furniture warehouse IXL Design; the colourful markets in Salamanca Place; right); and the island's oldest vineyard (bottom left) with restaurant, Moorilla Estate.



Tasmania – forever missing from the map of Australia and often the butt of tasteless jokes. Whatever you know of this little island at the tail-end of our continent, it's unlikely you're aware that it also boasts a multitude of strange and exotic achievements: among them, exporting tulips to Holland, designing and knitting award-winning beanies (the competition's pretty stiff at the annual international Alice Springs Beanie Festival) and holding claim to Australia's oldest golf course, bridge and church – not a bad list of accomplishments for a speck of land the size of Ireland with a population of under half a mil, and just one of the many surprises Tassie has in store.

For it seems Tasmania is in the midst of a renaissance, something that becomes apparent when I touch down in inner-city Hobart. Here, locals talk about 'the other island' – meaning the mainland where the other 20.5 million Australians live. It's not hard to see why: with a flourishing arts scene, fascinating heritage and breathtaking mountain scenery, Hobart is one of Australia's most intriguing cultural hubs. The nation's second-oldest capital is, to this day, a busy working harbour brimming with historical buildings, fantastic restaurants and bars with picturesque waterfront views. Whether you choose to hike up frosty Mt Wellington, take in the city's diverse nightlife or simply unwind by the ocean, Hobart has something for everyone.

Summer is when the little island is inundated with blow ins, like me – attracted by the Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race, the walking trails through pristine wilderness and the festivals for everything from pop music to antique furniture (including Hobart's Summer Festival, Comedy Festival and Folk festival, to name but a few). The joys of Tasmania's capital city are plentiful: in a hire car, one can wind along country roads, exploring the wineries of the Coal River Valley as little as 20 minutes away before stopping for an Oyster Stout and so-fresh-they're-still-wriggling oysters, plucked from the briny sea at Barilla Estate.

It's a time of year when umbrellas bloom along Hobart's historic Salamanca Place – a stately line of Georgian sandstone warehouses on the waterfront which houses an enviable cafe strip and plays host, each Saturday, to what has been called Australia's best market. Musicians play on the streets, coffee drinkers imbibe and the city's denizens stop their cold-weather toil

and kick back, combing the second-hand bookshops and art studios woven into laneways splitting off from the Place.

Salamanca Place and the nearby docks are the heart of Australia's southernmost capital, cleaved in two by the broad, slow-moving Derwent River and connected by the Tasman Bridge, a spectacular curve that turns a soft, champagne pink in the evening hours, when – to the delight of skiving children and pavement-cafe aficionados – daylight saving means no darkness till 10pm and bright, early dawns.

Really, the bridge is worthy of a city on a much larger scale. Hobart, now home to just 205,000 people, was devastated in 1975 when the ore carrier *Lake Illawarra* unexpectedly bulldozed through the curve, shattering the bridge, killing 12 and dividing the city into two separate parts.

The ensuing front page photo showed a car dangling by its rear axle over the Derwent River. Eventually, it was pulled back from the brink and merrily pootles around the island to this day, still a lucky charm for its fortunate owner, 31 years later. He'll never sell it – they're a different breed down here. In fact, many

Here, locals talk about 'the other island' – meaning the mainland where the other 20.5 million Australians live

mainlanders are drawn here precisely because of that difference. The city seems to revel in high quirk.

The island reeks of such history, much of it infinitely sad: female factories rehabilitating wayward women, boys dumped onto remote islands like some colonial *Lord of the Flies* adventure, men's bones cemented into elegant, low stone bridges that still stand today. Not surprising, given our love of all things gory, these sites of desolation are now great tourist attractions. "You can hear them screaming as you cross the bridge," say old Tasmanians grimly, while the younger generation wriggles with delight.

In the Henry Jones, one of the city's slick five-star hotels on the waterfront, the staff tell how whale blubber was boiled right here, in what's now the reception, when Tasmania moved on from being a colony of criminals to a whaling and sealing station. >

dining out

CHEAP EAT Fish Frenzy For fish and chips without the bench, try this cafe on Elizabeth Street Pier – it's seriously laid-back, no doubt due partly to the fact that it's also licensed. Bestsellers include their spicy calamari salad and fresh flathead, from \$9, with kid-sized meals also on the menu. Call (03) 6231 2134, or visit www.fishfrenzy.com.au.

MID-RANGE Meadowbank Estate Kick back with a wine tasting followed by lunch in the Coal River Valley. This cellar door and restaurant features scallops and oysters sourced from its own backyard. In summer, grab a seat on the terrace, order a bottle of their sparkling wine and

get someone else to drive you the easy 15 minutes back to Hobart. The enticing menu comprises a series of entree-sized dishes, \$18 each, so you can pick and choose. Call (03) 6248 4484, or visit www.meadowbankwines.com.au.

BLOW THE BUDGET Moorilla Estate Take a river boat up to the source restaurant at Moorilla Estate, the island's oldest vineyard, 25 minutes by water, for a lazy midweek lunch accompanied by their St Matthias sparkling wine. Call (03) 6277 9900, or visit www.moorilla.com.au. Navigators cruises are priced at \$22 return, \$18 one-way, call (03) 6223 1914.

shopping

BEST HOMEWARES STORE IXL Design This shop sells everything from beautiful baby shoes to jewellery and original Tasmanian timber furniture. Put an hour aside for serious browsing, then hop along next door to Art Mob to view an innovative collection of Aboriginal art. IXL Design, call (03) 6231 2288, or visit www.ixl.design.com. Art Mob, call (03) 6236 9200, or visit www.artmob.com.au.

BEST MARKET Salamanca Markets On a sunny day, there's no better place than the Retro Cafe. If self-catering, grab your apples from The Apple Man, in situ since 1982, then get yourself some fresh organic veggies from the Hmong growers.

Hobart by dusk: the Islington Hotel (this picture and right), one of Tasmania's most luxurious boutique hotels, boasts stunning views of nearby Mount Wellington (below right).



< And one of the most heartbreaking sights is undeniably the few, flickering seconds of footage shown in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery of what's said to be the last thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger.

In Hobart, what was once mournful has become fabulous, rebranded with a flourish of Tassie's distinct artistic style and more than a dash of good public relations sense – and we love it. Loneliness and isolation are traded off for some of the planet's cleanest environments and purest air. And instead of brutish rum, we're drinking a cheeky local sparkling white, and those oysters, fresh, vibrant and muscular, slip down smoothly, accompanied by tales of 19th-century devilry, 20th-century industry and 21st-century delights. ■

hot hotels

BUDGET Customs House Hotel

You've got to brave the hectic Keno lounge, but upstairs, the hotel's 22 rooms are spacious and clean, with a touch of style. The accommodation carries a 3.5-star rating – our favourite is Room 12, with three bay windows that look out over Salamanca Place, so you're right in the thick of it. From \$120/double, call (03) 6234 6645, or visit www.customshousehotel.com.

MID-RANGE Corinda's Cottages

Australian antiques and unexpected finds such as a deer's head or old packing crates find a much-loved home in three little self-contained cottages around a stunning Victorian mansion, built in 1885. Fully self-contained, they're located up in Glebe, overlooking Hobart and within

walking distance of the botanic gardens. One of the owners is a florist, so there are always beautiful fresh flowers in the rooms. From \$195/double, call (03) 6234 1590, or visit www.corindascottages.com.au.

BLOW THE BUDGET Islington Hotel

Breathtakingly beautiful, this has to be the island's best boutique hotel. The Georgian shell has been completely modernised, with to-die-for Kaldewei baths in the rooms, Biedermeier lounges, an art collection boasting Whiteleys and Matisse's, a morning room, library and Rose Room featuring Jim Thompson silks and more chaises than you can poke a peacock feather at. Make friends with Daniel the houseman, recently of Buckingham Palace, and don't miss breakfast. From \$500/double, Call (03)

don't miss out on

BEST PROVIDORE Wursthau Kitchen

Just off Salamanca Place, is this kitchen, unsurpassed for Tassie's best produce and a sensational wine collection. If planning a picnic or entertaining at home, stop by here for all the trimmings. Owner Nicole Frith-Trioli says the perfect picnic hamper should include Pyengana chipped curd cheddar with a wedge of Perfect Pastes' quince paste and a bottle of d'meure's chardonnay 2003. They also have a tasty pork with prune and walnut terrine, local Berkshire ham carved from the bone, Woodbridge's traditional smoked ocean trout and their own handmade chocolates. Try the limoncello chocolate paired with Bream Creek's 2004 Schonburger Late Picked, a light, citrusy dessert wine. Call (03) 6224 0644.